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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RABAT 001809

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG, NEA/OFI
PARIS FOR ZEYA AND DEA HABIB
LONDON FOR TSOU
ROME FOR ROSE

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SUBJECT: MOROCCO POLITICAL HIGHLIGHTS

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EARLY REACTIONS TO ALGERIA'S NEW AMBASSADOR TO MOROCCO

[1](#)2. (C) Following several weeks of rumors, Algeria officially appointed Presidential Chief of Staff (and former Army General) Larbi Belkheir Ambassador to Morocco on August 25, according to local press reports. Contacts tell us that despite Belkheir's years of service in the Algerian military, he is regarded within Moroccan foreign policy circles as a "man of dialogue," particularly with respect to bilateral relations with Morocco. While Morocco is generally wary of Algerian officials with military backgrounds, the King reportedly approved Belkheir's agreement the same day. One MFA official, Multilateral Affairs Director Mohamed Loulichki, sounded a more pessimistic note, telling Polcouns that Morocco expected that Bouteflika would keep Belkheir on a tight leash, and scoffing at notions that Belkheir was more sympathetic to Morocco than other members of Bouteflika's circle. Post will report further reactions septel.

KING MOHAMMED VI RECEIVES KING OF BAHRAIN

[1](#)3. (U) King Mohammed VI received King Hamad Ben Issa Al Khalifa of Bahrain at the Royal Palace in Tetouan on August 23, according to Morocco's official news agency, Maghreb Arabe Presse (MAP). The two leaders reportedly discussed ways to improve bilateral relations and the implications of Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza strip.

KING PARDONS UNDERAGE WOULD-BE SUICIDE BOMBER TWINS

[1](#)4. (U) On the occasion of the Revolution of the King and the People on August 20, the King pardoned the 16-year old twin sisters that were sentenced to 5 years in prison in January 2004 on charges they belonged to a Rabat terrorist group and volunteered to serve as suicide bombers (ref A), according to the English-language Morocco Times website. In an interview with Morocco Times, the twins expressed deep regret at having been caught up in fundamentalist ideology and vowed to live a normal life free of extremism. The sisters explained that poverty and a divided family contributed to their decision to turn to extremism. The twins were transferred upon their release to the Childhood Protection Center in Casablanca where a judge decided they will remain until they reach the age of 18 or are claimed by their families. The sentencing of the twins had caused widespread anguish in Moroccan society.

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY PLEASED WITH POW RELEASE

[1](#)5. (U) The United Nations, European Union, France, and Amnesty International have issued public statements since August 18 commending the release of the 404 Moroccan POWs in the Tindouf camps by the Polisario, according to MAP. UNSYG Kofi Annan and Amnesty International called the release a "positive step," while France and the EU expressed a desire that the release would lead to a final negotiated solution to the conflict.

PJD AND USFP CLASH OVER CULTURAL FESTIVALS

16. (U) The Socialist Union of Popular Forces party (USFP) and the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD) have been waging a media war over the role of cultural festivals in Morocco through various media outlets since July. The clash began after the Movement of Unity and Reform (MUR), a conservative wing within the PJD, released a statement criticizing the "ethical drifts" (such as hashish smoking) that occur at these festivals and calling them places of debauchery. In tit-for-tat fashion, the Minister of Culture, Mohammed Achaari, a senior USFP member, stated in an interview with French-language daily Aujourd'hui le Maroc that Islamists are "against modernity." Minister Achaari defended the rights of young Moroccans to challenge those who would impose their morality on others. The editor-in-chief of the PJD-affiliated, Arabic daily Attajdid, Abdelilah Benkirane, responded with an article indicating that MUR has a right to bring to the attention of its readers the "illegal" behavior that takes place during festivals. The PJD-USFP media war is reminiscent of a similar clash between the two parties in February 2005 when Attajdid carried articles claiming that Muslim victims of the tsunami in Southeast Asia were being punished by God for inappropriate behavior.

NARCOTICS

17. (U) The province of Larache in northern Morocco will be declared "cannabis-free" on September 12, according to French-language daily Aujourd'hui le Maroc. The official ceremony marking the occasion will be overseen by a delegation from the European Commission as well as Minister of Interior Al Mostapha Sahel and Director of Agency for the Development of the Northern Provinces Driss Benhima. The government has reportedly destroyed some 3,697 hectares of cannabis in the campaign.

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

18. (U) In two separate operations between August 20-22, the Royal Navy seized 109 would-be illegal immigrants off the coast of Al Hoceima in northern Morocco, according to MAP. All 109 suspects, who were attempting to illegally emigrate to Spain, were turned over to the Gendarmerie Royale for medical attention, investigation, and legal procedure.
RILEY